

Chairman Davis and Members of the Committee, good morning and thank you for asking me to testify at today's hearing on the National Capital Region's preparedness and response to Hurricane Isabel. I am Richard White, General Manager and Chief Executive Officer of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA).

Unprecedented Regional Coordination

As the largest transit provider for the National Capital Region (NCR), Metro actively participated in the region's planning, coordination and response to the threat posed by Hurricane Isabel. There was an unprecedented level of regional coordination and collaboration at critical periods before, during and after the storm. The effort underscores the significant progress the region has made since the tragic events of 9/11.

In response to 9/11, the NCR, using the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) as the organizing structure, developed and adopted a Regional Emergency Coordination Plan (RECP). The RECP was developed to provide a framework for assisting the local, state, federal, and private sector partners in coordinating their preparations for a response to a regional emergency. It has been formally approved by the 17 local governments, the State of Maryland, The Commonwealth of Virginia and the District of Columbia, numerous federal agencies and regional private and public sector entities. A critical component of the RECP is the Regional Incident Communication and Coordination System (RICCS). The RICCS provides a system for COG members, the states, the federal government, other public agencies, the private sector, schools and volunteer organizations to collaborate in

planning, communication, information sharing, and coordination on decision making before, during and after a regional emergency or incident. In the case of Hurricane Isabel, these procedures and communications capabilities that were put into place after 9/11 enabled NCR entities to quickly review and coordinate actions that individual decision making bodies were planning to take.

WMATA's Decision Making Process

In the 30 years of bus service and 27 years of rail, WMATA had no history of dealing with a hurricane with the size and strength of Hurricane Isabel, but we do have a reservoir of experience in dealing with severe weather conditions. Our actions were guided by an evaluation of two overarching threshold questions. First, when is it unsafe to operate? And second, how much advance notice do we provide regarding our intentions to restrict service? Emphasis was placed on safety – safety to our customers and employees – and certainty in terms of communicating to the public our decisions on service.

On the issue of safety, given our lack of experience with the heavy winds that were being predicted, our top operations and safety staff conducted an overall risk assessment based on the probability of a severe weather event, and the severity of such an event. In doing so, we sought guidance from the National Weather Service, the Federal Transit Administration and transit agencies that have frequently experienced hurricane force winds, such as the Miami/Dade transit system. Based on these consultations, a determination was made that our mass transit operations would be unsafe for customers, pedestrians, and our employees when weather conditions resulted in sustained winds at or

in excess of 40 miles per hour (mph). We did evaluate operating a limited service on our Metrorail system restricted to our underground service area.

RICCS Conference Calls

The region conducted two RICCS conference calls on Wednesday, September 17, under the auspices of the COG Chief Administrative Officers (CAO) Committee.

Approximately 60 parties participated on these calls, reflecting the interdependencies of decisions that are made by the federal government, local governments, private employers, schools, and transportation providers. An important part of the calls were the specifics of the weather assessments provided by the designated officer of the National Weather Service. WMATA participated in both of these calls, as well as 6 separate conference calls (over a three day period) that coordinated activities for various operators of transportation systems in the NCR, including WMATA, local bus systems, and the region's two commuting rail systems (VRE and MARC).

During these calls, there was a strong consensus that a coordinated and unified message should be delivered to the public reflecting the serious nature of the impending weather event and the public safety consequences. As a result, we were strongly encouraged to shut down the entire Metrorail system, not just the above ground portion, out of concern that we were sending a "mixed message" to our customers by contradicting others who were saying it would not be safe to be out at all once the hurricane's full force arrived in the region. We were also concerned that some people could become confused and stranded in the Metrorail system just as conditions were worsening and becoming unsafe.

During the afternoon call, the National Weather Service confirmed earlier forecasts of sustained winds in 40-45 mph range and with gusts of 60 mph, but moved up the predicted arrival time from late afternoon on the following day to early afternoon. During this call, an overwhelming consensus emerged among the group that in an effort to avoid ambiguity, we needed to err on the side of being early rather than late on announcing and implementing plans and actions. It was reaffirmed that conference call participants wanted WMATA to announce its decision to the public on Wednesday rather than wait until the next day. This was consistent with the approach being taken to announce school closings and local governments closures. The federal government reaffirmed that it would be announcing its final decision by the Wednesday evening news cycle. Based on all these factors, we announced our intention to stop accepting customers into the entire Metrorail and Metrobus system at 11:00 am Thursday morning in order to ensure that our customers and employees were out of harm's way by 2:00 p.m., and that all local bus systems could complete their services by 2:00 p.m. as well.

By announcing our decision early Wednesday evening, we were able to get the word out in time for evening newscasts on radio and television, and for the next day's newspapers. We wanted to give our customers as much information and notification time as possible in advance when faced with making decisions about their Thursday morning and afternoon commutes. We also provided notification and updates of our service changes on our web site, e-alert messages to customers and through our automated customer service call line. We utilized all these public outreach outlets again following the third RICCS conference call at 5:00 a.m. Friday, where after conducting an early

morning impact assessment, we announced to the region our intention to re-open the system at 8:00 a.m.

Post Storm Assessment and Next Steps

WMATA is currently in the process of completing a self-assessment and working with our partners to assess the regional coordination process and ways in which the planning and response to threats posed by hurricanes can be improved in the future. Hurricane Isabel was the main agenda item at two COG meetings conducted this week - the region's Chief Administrative Officers and COG's Emergency Planning Council. I participated in both of these meetings, and aside from providing a postmortem analysis on the actions taken two weeks ago, we also discussed ways in which we can tighten up the process for managing the RICCS calls and reporting out information derived from these calls.

In the hours during the storm, and for some of us for several days after its passing, we were reminded of how dependent we all are on a reliable source of electricity. WMATA is a major consumer of power and has a critical stake in the evaluation of how to improve the region's grid/transmission system. While we were never without power necessary to run trains, we did temporarily lose power at five rail stations, four rail yards and two bus garages during the storm. All things considered, we were lucky and our operations people were able to work around the outages. Even prior to Hurricane Isabel, we had begun to conduct an internal power vulnerability assessment throughout the entire system. Given how critical a reliable source of electricity is to our ability to provide our

transit services, we need to communicate to all pertinent parties that we are a significant stakeholder in regional power assessments.

Aside from the power issue, we are also conducting assessments and evaluating next steps to be taken in other areas critical to operating the system. We have discussed with our Board revisiting circumstances under which we might adjust our peak period fares charged when we are not able to provide a full level of service. Currently, our Board's directive stipulates that rush hour fares must be time based and not service based and can only be changed by Board action.

We are reevaluating the safety criteria that guided our decision and we are looking at the pluses and minuses of creating an underground only service plan in future scenarios comparable to Isabel. We're exploring ways that we can improve getting our message out to the public and assessing proper notification periods for service disruption announcements. We have also conducted a preliminary assessment of the extra costs and lost revenues caused by the storm.

The preparation and response to Hurricane Isabel reinforced the critical role Metro plays in the region. People ride Metro to activities and destinations that sustain the lifeblood of the regional economy and functions of government. Reliable Metro service ensures the continuity of operations of governments, businesses, schools and hospitals throughout the region. As we all witnessed just two weeks ago, a shut-down of Metro service for even a limited period of time has a significant impact on the region. I'm not suggesting that under perilous conditions we can avoid limiting service. We will always operate from a clear and direct intention not to put customers and employees at risk in the

face of severe weather conditions, such as the near gale-force winds experienced two weeks ago.

Even under the best weather conditions, however, Metro in the near future faces significant challenges towards maintaining the standard of service our customers rightfully demand and expect. Metro is facing a funding crisis, as a result of our aging infrastructure and growing ridership. In essence, we're a victim of our own success. If we don't address these "aging pains," these funding challenges will push Metro into the downward spiral that previously affected other older, major transit systems such as New York, Chicago and Philadelphia. WMATA is appreciative of the support that Chairman Davis and other regional delegation members have provided Metro over the years. We look forward to continuing to work together constructively on maintaining, leveraging and securing the investment in our system as well as enhancing the region's emergency preparedness and response.

I want to thank you Mr. Chairman and the rest of the members of the Committee for the opportunity to present these remarks. I would be happy to answer any questions.